

Medicare restrictions on long term psychiatric treatment putting lives at risk

National Association of Practising Psychiatrists
Media Release 13 July 2000

Restrictions on patients undergoing long term psychiatric treatment must be removed if Australia is serious about assisting people at risk of suicide said Dr Larry Hermann, spokesman for the National Association of Practising Psychiatrists.

"Patients requiring intensive long term psychiatric treatment are generally the most chronically ill of psychiatric patients. They simply need to be able to access quality psychiatric care."

Under restrictions introduced in 1996 by federal Health Minister, Dr Michael Wooldridge, Medicare rebates for patients visiting their psychiatrists are reduced by 50% once a patient has reached their quota of 50 visits in a calendar year (Item 319 allows 160 visits before the rebate reduction cuts in for a limited number of conditions subject to highly qualified criteria).

Dr Wooldridge justified the restrictions using the example of "Dr 747" who he claimed conducted a 'blatant rort' and was engaged in a 'giant rip-off'.

However Dr Wooldridge, in December 1999, admitted in his answers to a Question on Notice regarding "Dr 747" that:

"The doctor in question [Dr 747] provided assurances and expert evidence to the Senior Medical Adviser of the Health Insurance Commission that the services were medically necessary."

and

"The Health Insurance Commission decided that referral [of Dr 747] to the Director of Professional Services Review was not appropriate having regard to the doctor's explanation."

Dr Hermann said, "There seems to be no clinical or economic justifications for the restrictions imposed on long term psychiatric treatment. The Minister's restrictions are based on a fiction. There was no rort. There was no rip-off."

In February 1999 Dr Wooldridge claimed in parliament that the number of people visiting a psychiatrist had increased by 10%. In fact he was later forced to correct himself revealing to Parliament that there had been a decline of 1% following his restrictions.

"Patients who need long term psychiatric help must be given support and encouragement to seek and maintain their treatment, not kept from seeking help," said Dr Hermann.